

AU/ACSC/BROAM/AY10

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE
AIR UNIVERSITY

Achieving Democracy in Afghanistan doesn't require a Western-style Democracy

by

John B. Broam, Major, USA

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Advisor: Dr. Jonathan K. Zartman

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

March 2010

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government or the Department of Defense. In accordance with Air Force Instruction 51-303, it is not copyrighted, but is the property the United States government.

Abstract

The West persists in advocating a democracy ill-suited for the Afghan people. The West should ask the following question: How may we assist the Afghan people in adopting a form of governance most consistent with their culture and current economic conditions to allow for effective control of Afghanistan? This essay discusses the cultural justification for more suitable governance, the importance of perceived governmental legitimacy by the Afghan people, and exposes obvious failings of the current attempt to implement a Western-style democracy within Afghanistan. The U.S. and the international community must fully recognize the cultural and historical basis for a more fitting democracy in Afghanistan. The system of government adopted must enable the government to effectively address the people's needs, thus attaining legitimacy. The imposition of a Western style democracy upon Afghanistan only continues to set the conditions for prolonged failure. However, the successful promotion of a culturally adapted democracy will produce needed regional stability. The key element is to promote democracy, not a purely Western democracy.

According to Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl, “Since the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan has become an experiment for the international community in installing democracy from outside.”¹ Certainly, the international community must continue to assist Afghanistan in recovering from decades of war, which have created a moribund economy lacking any industrial base. The economy cannot provide the circulation of goods required for daily life, employment for an ever growing population, or even retain capital within the country. Refugees continue to escape violence to neighboring states and drug money flows into Swiss bank accounts. Corruption continues to confound any attempts at legitimate governance within Afghanistan. The international community correctly or incorrectly perceives the multitude of issues facing Afghanistan and seeks to apply the appropriate solution. Also, the West undoubtedly possesses methods for implementing democracies and installing a market economy. However, the West persists in advocating a democracy ill-suited for the Afghan people. The West should ask the following question: How may we assist the Afghan people in adopting a form of governance most consistent with their culture and current economic conditions to allow for effective control of Afghanistan? This essay will discuss the cultural justification for more suitable governance, the importance of perceived governmental legitimacy by the Afghan people, and expose obvious failings of the current attempt to implement a Western-style democracy within Afghanistan.

The history of Afghanistan exhibits a rich, diverse, and resilient culture. However, during the past few decades of invasion and war, the weak central government collapsed and regional warlords terrorized the people. These conditions made it possible for the Taliban to assume power and accept al Qaeda’s operations within Afghanistan. Amalendu Misra contends: “States unable to maintain their political and territorial integrity or provide a semblance of law

and order within often fall victim to the designs of external powers and become the breeding grounds for dangerous non-state actors.”² As a result, al Qaeda operated from within

Afghanistan, prompting the US to invade following the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Following the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S., Olivier Roy argues that the international community believed, “The idea is that the Western concept of democracy could be implemented through the development of a ‘civil society’ of the building from scratch of new institutions.”³

The international community pledged billions of dollars in aid to assist in this endeavor, however, money can’t solve everything. Pledging large sums of money to assist in developing new governance isn’t the same as providing the necessary structure, organizations and dedicated personnel to assist and guide Afghanistan through the many years required for eventual progress.

Furthermore, the multitude of problems facing Afghanistan in the wake of the ousting of the Taliban weren’t solely due to lack of governance. Nick Mills asserts, “Afghanistan’s difficulty in dealing with the problems of drugs, corruption, and terrorism can be attributed in large measure to a shortfall in the support given to the country after the fall of the Taliban.”⁴

Additionally, building new, Western institutions within an underdeveloped country with strict tribal law would surely receive immediate resistance. Besides, Hamish Nixon and Richard Ponzio provide, “Through thousands of village level *shuras* and *jirgas* (local councils) and the national *loya jirga* (grand council), the Afghan people have practised [sic] indigenous forms of inclusive governance for hundreds of years.”⁵

Insisting on strict adherence to new institutions from the West serves as a recipe for failure. For this reason, Stephen Tanner correctly asserts, “The Americans should dismiss any notion of transplanting an instant Jeffersonian democracy onto a population that has traveled its own ancient cultural path and is currently as attentive to Islamic precepts as to government legislation.”⁶ Western democracy is not a plug and play

concept for an Islamic and tribal Afghanistan. Although a form of government based on Islamic ideals of consultation and consensus may succeed if implemented with Afghan culture and tribal law in mind, success requires the Afghan people to perceive any structure of administration as legitimate.

Legitimacy of government in the eyes of the population proves crucial for significant strides in advancing stability in Afghanistan. Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl assert, “Legitimacy is key to building sustainable peace, and this legitimacy comes not from the timetable of donors with blueprints of post conflict reconstruction, but from the points of view of the population.”⁷ A perception of corruption at any point in the process can considerably damage legitimacy. After more than eight years after the U.S. invasion and expulsion of the Taliban, the Afghan people expect verifiable progress towards legitimate governance. Faridullah Bezhan contends, “The problems that bedevil Afghanistan are the very slow pace of reconstruction, security, corruption, unemployment, and government accountability.”⁸ The Afghan people must see concrete results and clear benefits of their new government in action. As Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl note, “The lack of tangible development and welfare gains in the everyday lives of the Afghans, especially when it is public knowledge that the international community has spent massive amounts of money in Afghanistan, fuels mistrust.”⁹ However, if the Afghan people observe improvements in their everyday lives as a result of reconstruction projects, employment opportunities, and adequate security, then they will take ownership in their government. As progress continues, the people will become the driving force behind democratization.¹⁰ Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl present the converse:

Lack of ownership and participation is linked with the failure of democratization because it generates dissatisfaction and disillusionment, which, when combined

with perceptions of social injustice in the distribution of development gains, lead to mistrust of the intervention and a sustained cycle of conflict that further erodes all democratization gains.¹¹

“When Afghanistan no longer fears for its own disintegration, it will become more feasible for the state to experiment with forms of local governance and decentralization of the administration in order to provide the public services that the Afghan people are now demanding.”¹² If the Afghan government gains legitimacy in the eyes the people, support for democracy will strengthen; however, excessive pressure to rapidly achieve a Western-style procedural democracy will surely create antagonism and resistance throughout the country and the region.

Many advisors from the international community are seeking to implement Western-style democracy in their likeness within Afghanistan. As addressed previously in this essay, a Western-style democracy is not sufficient to put into practice directly in Afghanistan. For this reason, Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl argue:

The democratization project in Afghanistan therefore seems to have reached a stand-off between what the international community wished to see in Afghanistan, in terms of the liberal tenets of Western democracy, and what the Afghans were trying to carve out for themselves, to cajole and adapt to their circumstances, culture and history.¹³

The international community must recognize the benefits of allowing modifications to the templates of a Western-style democracy for Afghanistan. Additionally, Ali Jalali asserts, “Both state building and governance in Afghanistan are troubled by diverging concepts that influence the policies of domestic, regional, and global actors on the Afghan scene.”¹⁴ The international community must reach a consensus on what effective governance within Afghanistan will resemble, only then will progress become possible. Ali Jalali warns, “Long-term stability in Afghanistan requires that efforts be directed toward changing the divisive situation rather than adopting solutions solely to accommodate the existing fragmentation.”¹⁵ Selecting governance

solutions to repair a broken institution will only delay the inevitable failure of the system.

Furthermore, the West must recognize that progress in regards to the democratization and the economy will take significant time, especially during continued military conflict. In this day and age of quick solutions, Kevin Frank reminds us, “The West took upward of six hundred years to develop the social, governmental, and economic capability to reach the present level of free-market economics.”¹⁶ Attempting to achieve success too rapidly will only set the conditions for eventual failure and instability within the region. Nick Mills contends, “As a poor and weak state, Afghanistan also needs the international community to help mediate positive relations with its neighbors.”¹⁷ Therefore, the international community must promote constructive security and economic relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as Iran. Additionally, Pakistan’s concerted efforts in the most recent campaign in the border areas with Afghanistan remains critical for the security of both countries and the eventual defeat of Taliban and al Qaeda elements.

In conclusion, the U.S. and the international community must fully recognize the cultural and historical basis for a more fitting democracy in Afghanistan. The system of government adopted must enable the government to effectively address the people’s needs, thus attaining legitimacy. The imposition of a Western-style democracy upon Afghanistan only continues to set the conditions for prolonged failure. However, the successful promotion of a culturally adapted democracy will promote much needed regional stability. As Andrew Natsios observes, “Although the promotion of democracy in the Muslim world might lead to popular but anti-American governments in the short run, it is in the long-term interests of the U.S. to promote democracy.”¹⁸ The key element is to advance democracy, not a purely Western-style democracy.

-
- ¹ Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl, "Playing with Fire? The International Community's Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping*, April 2008, 252.
- ² Amalendu Misra, "Afghanistan," 4.
- ³ Olivier Roy, "Development and Political Legitimacy: The Cases of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Conflict, Security & Development*, August 2004, 168.
- ⁴ Nick Mills, "Karzai: *The Failing American Intervention and the Struggle for Afghanistan*," 215.
- ⁵ Hamish Nixon and Richard Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan: The Statebuilding Agenda and International Engagement," *International Peacekeeping*, January 2007, 28.
- ⁶ Stephen Tanner, "Afghanistan: *A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*," 325.
- ⁷ Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl, "Playing with Fire? The International Community's Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping*, April 2008, 265.
- ⁸ Faridullah Bezhan, "Afghanistan's Parliamentary Election: Towards the Path of Democracy," *Conflict, Security & Development*, June 2006, 238.
- ⁹ Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Michael Schoiswohl, "Playing with Fire? The International Community's Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping*, April 2008, 260.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 253.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 253.
- ¹² J. Alexander Thier, "The Future of Afghanistan," 21.
- ¹³ Ibid., 258.
- ¹⁴ Ali Jalali, "Afghanistan: The Challenge of State Building," In *Afghanistan: Transition Under Threat*, ed. Geoffrey Hayes et al., (The Centre for International Governance Innovation and Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 31.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 46.
- ¹⁶ Kevin Frank, "Democracy and Economics in Afghanistan: Is the Cart Before the Horse?," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Winter 2006, 108.
- ¹⁷ Nick Mills, "Karzai: *The Failing American Intervention and the Struggle for Afghanistan*," 220.
- ¹⁸ Andrew Natsios, "Democratic Opportunity in the Arab and Muslim World," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, June 2006, 263.

Bibliography

- Bezhan, Faridullah, "Afghanistan's Parliamentary Election: Towards the Path of Democracy," *Conflict, Security & Development*, 2 June 2006: 231-239.
- Frank, Kevin K., "Democracy and Economics in Afghanistan: Is the Cart Before the Horse?," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Winter 2006: 102-115.
- Jalali, Ali A., "Afghanistan: The Challenge of State Building." In *Afghanistan: Transition Under Threat*, edited by Geoffrey Hayes and Mark Sedra, 25-50. The Centre for International Governance Innovation and Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008.
- Mills, Nick B., *Karzai: The Failing American Intervention and the Struggle for Afghanistan*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007.
- Misra, Amalendu, *Afghanistan*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.
- Natsios, Andrew S., "Democratic Opportunity in the Arab and Muslim World," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19, no. 2, (June 2006): 263-270.
- Nixon, Hamish and Richard Ponzio, "Building Democracy in Afghanistan: The Statebuilding Agenda and International Engagement," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1, (January 2007): 26-40.
- Roy, Olivier, "Development and Political Legitimacy: The Cases of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Conflict, Security & Development*, 2 August 2004: 167-179.
- Tadjbakhsh, Shahrbanou and Michael Schoiswohl, "Playing with Fire? The International Community's Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan," *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 2, (April 2008): 252-267.
- Tanner, Stephen, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*, Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002.
- Thier, J. Alexander, *The Future of Afghanistan*, United States Institute for Peace, 2009.

